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ABSTRACT

The following article provides a look at the creative process through the eyes of positive psychology. It describes first how creativity fits into the theory behind this field, then goes on to trace how a positive psychologist might consider this construct: observing how it functions therapeutically in the natural environment, then theorizing about how that process could be enhanced, supported, instigated, or developed through therapeutic intervention. Finally, the article pinpoints some advantages to a therapeutic approach utilizing the creative process over traditional techniques. (Author)

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Creativity: Its Role in Healing and Place in Positive Psychology

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Abstract

The following article provides a look at the creative process through the eyes of positive psychology. It describes first how creativity fits into the theory behind this field, then goes on to trace how a positive psychologist might consider this construct: observing how it functions therapeutically in the natural environment, then theorizing about how that process could be enhanced, supported, instigated, or developed through therapeutic intervention. Finally, the article pinpoints some advantages to a therapeutic approach utilizing the creative process over tradition techniques.

Creativity: Its Role in Healing and Place in Positive Psychology

The theory behind positive psychology has the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in the field of psychology at large. Rather than focusing on pathology, positive psychologists hold that we will better understand and help people if we focus on their innate resiliency and coping mechanisms. We may then learn how to facilitate the kind of healing that occurs in nature, or undo blocks against it. By attending to how the healthiest among us adapt to and recover from stressful lifestyles, losses, trauma, and pain, we pay homage to human strength and resiliency, and are able to build on the wisdom that has developed through evolution. Creativity has certainly been mentioned in the context of positive psychology, but this article seeks to better establish creativity as holding an important place in the development and application of this movement. I will briefly discuss how I see creativity fitting into the field of positive psychology, then how and why it might be incorporated into our therapeutic process in this context.

The creative process beautifully embodies our natural impulse for change, without which stagnation would occur. Emotional healing itself is creative: searching for ways to reframe, find meaning, understand, and move through. The two aspects of the creative process that make it exemplify characteristics focused on by positive psychologists are its being a natural human strength, and its intuitive use by people coping and adjusting. Addressing the first tenet, to illustrate how creativity is an innate human characteristic, we may look at our dreams, our building of relationships, our improvising through each conversation, our problem solving, and our creation of a whole range of things to move our race forward, such as tools, ideas, and children. The typical behavior and play of these children is perhaps even more convincing evidence for the creative tendency of our race.

Then, in addition to being a human strength, creativity also has clearly played a role in our resiliency through time. The song-writing, story-telling, ceremonies, and rituals created by our ancestors to deal with death and other painful experiences are examples of how we make meaning, vital in healing, by creating forms that will hold our difficult experiences. Today, journaling, gardening, dancing, painting, and many other creative arts, are used to express, and bring hope to, the deep struggles of our time:

"successful mourning centrally involves a demand we make on ourselves to create something--whether it be a memory, a dream, a story, a poem, a response to a poem--that begins to meet, to be equal to, the full complexity of our relationship to what has been lost and to the experience of loss itself" [Ogden, 2000, p.65]. The creative process is also a positive approach in that it values and provides a means for expressing one's unthought knowledge, trusting one's deeper self holds a voice worth hearing. Art allows us to symbolically representing things too profound for words. The place of the creative process as an innate human strength utilized through time for psychological coping and healing, make it a perfect focus for positive psychologists.

A friend of mine recently described his pain at age fourteen, when his father was killed in an accident. He described briefly what happened and when he first found out, but what he spent the most time describing, and what provoked his tears, was his description of the tomb stone he designed for his father's grave. He explained each part meticulously, helping me understand the meaning behind each representation and why it was placed where. If positive psychologists want to know what natural human qualities are used effectively as a means of moving through despair and pain, the creative process, holding dignity and beauty that has captured human hearts through time, must not be left out of the discussion.

The above is an example of how human suffering can be attended by the creative process, and how it seems to play a role in adjustment and recovery. The logical question to follow, and one that would be asked by positive psychologists, is: "what about this process is healing?" Perhaps the most obvious effective component of the creative process is expression. Expression, long used in almost every psychological therapeutic form, involves releasing pain held inside so that it can be contained by other people or by a work of art, and allowing oneself to be known. Particularly through art, a deep universal human experience can be expressed and recognized as such, profoundly connecting human to human even in times of suffering. Expressing feelings requires opening to oneself and one's experience, letting down defenses and desolving numbness. The creative process allows one to practice entering dark places and returning. Giving

form to pain seems to acknowledge what is inside, while shaping it into something sacred and complete.

One winter night in Vermont, near the closing of my college experience, I met my sister in the beautiful dance studio in which I had spent so much time and heart. The Green mountains hovering outside the windows and the room in which I had done so much of my developing, felt like home. I was only subtly aware of the loss I was about to undergo by graduating, until my sister and I walked out into the center of the space and she said: "You are going to miss this place, aren't you?" As I began to cry, she walked over to the piano in the corner and started to play. I danced for an hour as she played, tears falling on the smooth wood floor, covered by shining shapes of light that slowly faded as the sun set. Holding hands and bowing to the space at the completion of our ceremony, my sister and I needed no words. My feeling of loss was transformed by the beauty of the expression given, into an experience that felt contained and whole.

In addition to expression, the creative process can sometimes offer insight, understanding, and the feeling of not holding something alone. I believe this effect is realized the most when what is made is a strong container for the feelings expressed. In the world of art, the container might be seen as the work's artistic elements, composition, and careful shaping—the technical qualities developed over the life of an art form that are considered the base on which the power of the creation rests. A good artist, then, must learn how to let down his or her defenses enough to express something that may have great feeling behind it, while creating artistic form strong enough to hold the complexity and depth of the experience in a way that is meaningful and understandable, at least at a physical level.

I began to understand art as a container when I lost one of my dear friends, and a dancer in my work, in a car accident three weeks before the opening of a concert I choreographed. The entire concert took on new meaning as it merged with my mourning process. My mentor, watching the evolution of my choreography, warned me that if I did not focus as much attention on form as feeling, I would end up with an uncontained, sentimental piece, shallow compared to the depth of my experience. Trusting her, I concentrated on the technical aspects of my work. My experience then began to emerge

in more complexity, filling the form I made effortlessly. It is the strength of the container, not only the passion in what fills it, that has allowed those works that have gained fame and moved many to transcend their creators. When a work takes on a life of its own, it may reflect back, as a therapist might, what the artist expressed, with all its depth and unconscious elements, providing insight and new understanding to its maker, while allowing the relief of no longer holding something alone. The work then has the power to change the artist and possibly viewers of the work as well.

So, having identified expression and its containment as two of the basic effective elements in healing through the creative process, positive psychologists might ask: "How can we enhance or facilitate this process?" Well, a therapist's central concern in this case might be communicating his/her valuing of the creative process and encouraging clients, helping them to access their creative selves. I would like to focus, however, on the role of the therapist given the conceptualization of containment described above. If it is correct that the creation of a technically strong piece of art can provide containment, reflection, and insight, causing more healing than that received from creative expression alone, then what about the novice artist? Here is where I see a therapist playing an important role, by providing the container that a composition itself may lack, holding the experience and facilitating understanding, synthesizing, and processing as material is creatively expressed. In Authentic Movement, one form of Movement Therapy, the therapist is called the "witness," acting "as a silent witness to the patient's explorations. The attention of the witness creates a secure containing environment in which the person moving can experience a sense of being held and seen. The witness uses his or her somatic countertransference as a means of understanding and responding to the patient's material" [Wyman-McGinty, 1998, p.239]. So, the therapist holds a higher level of consciousness while the client safely explores at deeper levels. I see conceptualizing the therapist as a container for the creative expression, when the artwork itself will not be shaped to do so, important because it makes the shift from the therapist interpreting an experience to holding it and reflecting it back.

A final, and vital, question remains: "What are the advantages of this work (and, of course, other methods have their own advantages) over more traditional therapeutic

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techniques, when both appear to have a base in expression, reflection, and insight?" Though verbal communication can be creative and can spring directly from the unconscious unmetabolized, as it may functionally in analysis, the "talking cure" today often involves clients' discussing and reflecting on events, dreams, behaviors and feelings which they have already interpreted. Much of what a client is able to express verbally is information he/she already knows. More explaining than exploring, then, may occur. Creative expression stands in sharp contrast to this process, as creating is exploratory in nature and often springs more directly from unconscious information or impulses.

Likewise, the abstract nature of the material expressed may also prevent a client from defending against its expression, allowing information from deeper, less known, places to emerge. In addition, veering from dependence on verbal communication may avoid many of the client's usual social defenses and maladaptive communication patterns. Also, information arising through creative work is often more complex than what can be expressed verbally. For instance, in dance movement therapy: "Movement is rarely from a single level of the psyche. Every expressive action reflects the individual mover's attempt to cope dynamically with impulses and images that come from many sources" [Chodorow, 1995, p.97]. Overall, the ease with which authentic, complex, and unconscious information is accessed and expressed is unique to creative therapies.

Another advantage of creative work in healing is that it uses different parts of the brain than speaking about something does. Dr. Saper, a Harvard professor and brain researcher, described in lecture how the right side of the brain is oriented toward real time and real place, whereas the left side functions more in abstractions. Language, arising primarily in this left hemisphere, allows someone to represent something verbally, an abstraction of the actual experience or event. The right side of the brain is considered the home of our creativity. Creative work, then, emerges directly from real time and place experience, bringing material into present reality, and coming closer to meeting an actual experience or feeling that is being communicated.

Arguably more than in traditional therapeutic techniques, the creative process provides the feeling of making something, shaping, or giving form and meaning. Creating is the opposite of loss. Like giving birth, it is an act of hope. The creative

process feels productive, requiring active engagement and life energy that seems to foster commitment to healing. In addition, sometimes the creative process leads to the making of something to which one can return. Whether it be a ceremony, memory, or a piece of writing or art, the created object continues to hold symbolic meaning and inspire or nourish the maker over time.

As in the case of my friend, a Vietnam veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, who says the thing that gives him the most peace is his yearly pilgrimage to the Vietnam War Memorial, creative representation plays a healing role in our society at large. In addition to its role in therapy, creative expression has always been a voice for the societal concerns of the time, communicating in a way as to bring people together, raise awareness, and instigate change. Through the eyes of positive psychology, mental health professionals should be aware of people's natural strength and resiliency, and always be ready to foster and support those human qualities, such as creativity, which through time have been a means for us to find the meaning and beauty necessary to survive great pain and move forward.

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